

Introduction

Mr. Chairman, I am Rollin D. Sparowe, President of the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI). The Wildlife Management Institute was established in 1911, and is staffed by professional wildlife scientists and managers. It's purpose is to promote the restoration and improved management of wildlife in North America.

WMI commends the Committee for recognizing the importance of conservation programs within the context of the 2002 Farm Bill. The reauthorization of existing conservation programs are an important and integral component of developing a landscape that not only meets conservation needs, but the needs of the farmers and ranchers in the United States. An increase of \$1.5 billion is a good beginning. The public is increasingly aware of how important these conservation programs have been over the past five years and now expects Congress to follow through by increasing expenditures to address the quality of life issues that are prominent in the news today. Improving soil, water, and wildlife habitat are recognizable measures of national health. Citizens now look to this Committee to integrate multiple needs in an enhanced conservation title within the next Farm Bill.

We realize that significant funding is required to produce effective programs that meet the needs and desires of both landowners and the public in general. To that end, it is our belief that the funding suggested in the recently released concept proposal should be re-allocated with an eye toward programs that have a proven history of success. Also, funding should be directed to fulfill the existing program backlog and the future demand for programs that are known to exist.

Conservation Program Recommendations

When it comes to making a real difference on the land, both the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) are benchmarks that lead the way in addressing soil, water, and wildlife habitat enhancements in the United States.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

No program in history has done more for broad-scale conservation of habitat on farm lands while offering producers a significant and reliable source of income than the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). With depressed commodity prices being the recent norm, CRP has offered a welcome option to farmers for stable income from some of their most marginal cropland. CRP has been very popular with landowners across the country, especially in the vast heartland where the production of commodities dominates the farm community. In recent hearings held by this Committee, examples of successful enhancements of pheasant and waterfowl populations have been discussed and cited. In fact, these examples have been used to illustrate benefits to both local and state economies. CRP is more than a conservation program. It is responsible for a new economic reality based on increased hunting opportunities, ecotourism, and the production of environmental benefits. As society has evolved, many quality of life issues have become as important and valuable as the food and fiber produced on farms. The public is equally interested in an improved environment and affordable food and fiber, and they now expect both!

We recommend reauthorization of CRP at \$350 million annually, with a 45 million acre enrollment cap (\$3.5 billion over 10 years).

Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)

WRP provides farmers with financial incentives to remove marginal lands from crop production. These lands have proven to be unsuitable for crop production because of the frequency and duration of flooding or soil saturation. Thus, WRP provides an alternative for those lands that have proven to be difficult to farm, while reducing expenditures required for repeated disaster payments. Benefits from this program are evident along streams, lakes, bays, and estuaries throughout the country. The American taxpayers who value wildlife and open space, whether they are hunters, anglers, bird watchers or outdoor enthusiasts, obviously benefit from WRP.

WMI recommends reauthorization of WRP at \$375 million annually, with an annual enrollment of 250,000 acres (\$3.7 billion over 10 years).

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

In FY 1998 and FY 1999, partners and landowners contributed \$33.7 million to WHIP projects across the United States. Federal funding for the projects was \$40 million, in addition to \$10 million required for technical assistance. Thus, for every federal dollar spent on practices, nearly an equal amount was contributed by partners and landowners. In Maine, partner/landowner dollars equaled \$2 for every \$1 spent by the Federal government in FY 1998. In FY 1999, the ratio was 3:1. WHIP is a good deal for the landowner, the public, and the Federal government. WHIP is an efficient program that provides meaningful results.

Additional funding is needed to address concerns on lands that are not eligible for cost share under other USDA conservation programs. WHIP is especially important to the Northeast, West and Southeast regions of the U.S. where habitat threatened by urban and suburban sprawl can be protected. Finally, WHIP is a flexible program that is used to address a variety of issues including critical habitat for threatened and endangered species.

To meet the demand and to take advantage of the efficient use of dollars, we recommend funding WHIP at \$100 million annually (\$1 billion over 10 years).

New Grassland Reserve Program

WMI supports the inclusion of a new grassland reserve program in the next Farm Bill. Over time, most grasslands and shrublands in the heartland of the US, from Texas to the Canadian border, have been converted to cropland. Nearly all of the tall-grass prairie has been converted to productive row-crop agriculture. The mid-grass and short-grass prairies, further west, are becoming increasingly fragmented, but still provide a critical resource for our nation's livestock industry. The ranchers who own and manage these lands do so mostly at their own expense. More than 300 migratory bird species rely on the prairie for breeding and nesting habitat as well as resting locations during spring and autumn migrations. The prairies also support over 400 grass and forbes species, many of which might be used for medical cures in the future.

The soils supporting most remnant grasslands generally are unproductive and are often subject to high rates of erosion. Ranchers have expressed a great deal of interest in obtaining assurance that these lands remain in well-managed grasslands to support a strong ranching community.

WMI recommends \$20 million per year for this program (\$200 million over 10 years). This program would be best served through an annual incentive payment and easements.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP has evolved into a strong water quality improvement program, but other conservation issues have generally not received the same level of attention. EQIP could be enhanced through the authorization of annual incentive payments for conservation on working lands, similar to those provided through CRP. Annual incentive payments could be used to encourage producers to incorporate new crops and technologies into their operations such as biofuels and conservation tillage practices, or to protect important wildlife habitats such as remnant native grasslands or critical habitats for declining species.

As described in the concept paper, it seems as if EQIP is targeted specifically at water quality issues on large farms. The proposal lacks consideration of broader conservation interests, particularly for wildlife. Furthermore, small farms will most likely be at a disadvantage under the proposal. It is unlikely that EQIP will achieve the desired overall results related to soil, water and air quality in addition to wildlife habitat enhancement. Thus, to obtain the overall desired conservation results, we recommend greater enhancement of CRP, WRP, and WHIP.

WMI recommends funding EQIP at \$300 million (\$3 billion over 10 years) with 50% of annual funding going to livestock producers with operations of less than 3000 head.

Farmland Protection Program (FPP)

The Farmland Protection Program should require conservation easements that consider wildlife and fish habitat in addition to soil and water conservation. We recommend \$100 million annually (\$1 billion over 10 years).

Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program has a proven track record of protecting productive forest lands from development and fragmentation. Through either conservation easements or fee purchase, Legacy focuses on state assessments of need to set program priorities. The public benefits from the long-term environmental and economic values that are protected. **WMI recommends reauthorization of the Forest Legacy Program at a program level of \$150 million annually (\$1.5 billion over 10 years).**

Non-Industrial Private Forest Landowner Cost-Share Incentive Program

This new program should combine the Forest Stewardship Program and the Stewardship Incentives Program. To improve wildlife considerations, it is recommended that all conservation plans be multi-disciplinary in context. **WMI recommends a non-industrial private forest landowner cost share incentive program at \$10 million annually (\$100 million over 10 years).**

Small Watershed Dam Restoration

WMI recommends reauthorization of the Small Watershed Dam Restoration Program through 2011 at a program level of \$15 million per year (\$150 million over 10 years).

Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA)

With the loss of 2,000 positions related to the delivery of conservation plans by NRCS, an alternative mechanism of CTA must be found. Building a new and more streamlined infrastructure is needed. Recently, state fish and wildlife agencies have been cooperating with NRCS to provide additional staff and expertise to write conservation plans. This has been accomplished by hiring professional fish and wildlife biologists to work in NRCS offices. While both organizations share in the cost of the positions, state agencies can staff at less cost than NRCS.

WMI recommends the authorization of federally compensated partnering arrangements between NRCS and state fish and wildlife agencies to enable state agencies to adjust staffing levels to accommodate NRCS needs. The arrangements will help NRCS deliver specialized technical assistance to farmers/ranchers at less cost than adding new federal staff.

The state of Missouri provides a good example:

- Since 1995, NRCS reimburses 75% of the salary/benefits of each of four field-level wetland biologists and 50% of the salary/benefits of one state-level wetland biologist.
- Since 2000, NRCS provides office/furniture, telephone and internet access for 31 Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) private land conservationists. In return, the MDC employees respond to landowner requests for fish, forest, and wildlife assistance.

WMI recommends providing up to \$100 million per year to provide conservation technical assistance to private landowners through the use of state fish and wildlife agencies and conservation NGO's (\$850 million over 10 years).

State-level Coalition-building Efforts

In the spirit of “working together to increase resources for conservation via the 2002 Farm Bill,” landowners and representatives from commodity groups, agribusiness, wildlife and conservation organizations, Universities, and state and federal agencies have been meeting at the state level to review current Farm Bill programs and evaluate their successes and failures to date. Once analysis is completed, members of the groups plan to provide recommendations to their state delegation regarding the Conservation Title of the 2002 Farm Bill.

WMI would like to bring the status of this effort to the attention of the Committee. As of today, eight states have held successful meetings and approximately ten additional states are preparing for meetings in July and August. Trained facilitators are leading discussions and negotiating common goals within the group. While the dynamics in each state are unique, a majority of the participants are expressing support for enhanced conservation provisions in the next Farm Bill. The coalition-building process has provided an excellent opportunity for state-level natural resource and agricultural professionals to build relationships and eliminate misconceptions concerning Farm Bill conservation programs. We will continue to monitor the progress of this effort. We expect the Committee to benefit from the recommendations that will be provided by various states as the debate on the next Farm Bill continues.

Conclusion

WMI is encouraged by the hard work exhibited by various conservation organizations, commodity groups and the Committee to ensure a strong conservation component in the next Farm Bill. The proposals offered provide an excellent opportunity for landowners to voluntarily conserve our natural resources for future generations. We would like to commend Representative Peterson, Representative Kind, Representative Thune and others for introducing comprehensive legislation that is favorable for soil, water, and wildlife conservation. As the Farm Bill Concept Paper is reviewed by the Committee, we urge you to consider alternative proposals to ensure adequate funding for important conservation programs over the next ten years.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify and look forward to working with the Committee to construct a comprehensive Farm Bill.